

The Second Biggest Lie by Miss_Peletier

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Fluff and Angst, the "Jopper go visit Murray" fic I cried while writing

Language: English

Characters: Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Murray Bauman

Relationships: Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-08

Updated: 2017-11-08

Packaged: 2022-04-02 14:42:37

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 5,718

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

A year after defeating the Shadow Monster, Joyce and Hopper go to the one person they think could have information about a new danger in Hawkins.

Unfortunately for them, that person is none other than conspiracy theorist Murray Bauman.

The Second Biggest Lie

“Well, well,” the man said, offering a yellowed smile as he leaned against the metal doorway. “Here’s a sight I thought I’d never see.”

Joyce frowned, looked over at Jim. He was holding steady eye contact with the man she guessed - from description alone - was Murray Bauman.

“*Police Chief* Jim Hopper,” the man said, mocking. “What dire straits should bring you to my door? And accompanied by – “ Bauman made a great show of turning his head, dramatic. “The one and only Joyce Byers. At last, we meet. I’m Murray Bauman. You already know that.”

He didn’t extend a hand in formal greeting, which suited her just fine.

“He’s going to be an ass about this,” Jim had said on the ride there – a trip that had taken the better part of the day, and seen her staring at the sunset through the window of his police car. It was apparent from his terseness – the glower in his tone, the set in his shoulders – that he wasn’t looking forward to paying Bauman a visit. But with the lab gone and information scarce, it was a necessity.

The lab’s departure had been a good thing, for a little while. And for a few months – well, almost a year – things had been normal. Jonathan had applied (and been accepted early) to NYU, where he would be attending next fall. Will’s mind seemed to be completely *his* again, with no “now-memories” blurring the present and past. Jane was receiving tutoring from Nancy and Dustin, in hopes of joining her friends in high school next year.

Joyce had gone back to work at Melvald’s and tried to keep tears from sliding down her cheeks every time she drove past the RadioShack, a flickering sign in the window that advertised “Now under new ownership!” and lessons for beginners interested in BASIC coding. Jim kept trying to solve mysteries of missing lawn ornaments and small-town crimes, their paths crossing when he dropped Jane off for D&D nights or at the arcade.

The lab's departure had been a good thing, for a little while. Until Jane started having horrible headaches and bad dreams about Brenner – “papa,” Jim told Joyce she'd said, her voice shaking, her brown eyes tearful and haunted. Until Jane started having dreams about other kids – kids with numbers, just like hers – dreams that seemed less like her brain's midnight musings and more like premonitions. And in those dreams, they were coming to capture her.

“I don't understand,” Joyce had said when Jim told her, cigarette pinched between her fingers as they sat across from each other at her dining room table. The kids were in the living room, sounds of laughter accompanying the low hum of the light above her kitchen table, and everything – at least for the moment – seemed normal.

“Me, either,” Jim said. “Jane thought Brenner was dead. But now...”

He trailed off, and he didn't have to finish his sentence for Joyce to know what he was thinking. Now, there was a question mark where there had once been a period. And if Brenner was alive, it stood to reason that he wanted Jane...and he might be willing to go to grave lengths to get her back.

She and Jim had lived through enough of these occurrences by now to know what not to ignore, and Jane's symptoms were worth investigation. It was a tragedy, then, that the only doctors able to investigate those symptoms had vaporized into thin air, completely gone, thanks to an exposé by Murray Bauman.

The departure had been a good thing, until they'd realized that although the lab might be done with Hawkins, it might not be done with *them*.

Jim had tried Dr. Owens' number and gotten nothing. He told her he tried to get into the building that was nothing more than a shell of what the lab had once been – it now lay collecting dust, “keep out” signs now nothing more than lawn ornaments. And that was when Jonathan had told her about Bauman, given her and Jim his address while reminding them he might have moved since then. That they might find nothing more than they'd found on the outskirts of Hawkins: locked doors, empty hallways and no answers.

"We have to go," Joyce had said one night as they stood outside at sunset, sharing a cigarette on her front porch. October had finally started to creep into Hawkins, cooling the air and coating the sky with a reddish-pink hue. "This Murray Bauman, whoever he is...he seems like our best chance of figuring out the truth."

Jim was silent for a moment, staring down at her with a careful mix of appreciation and reservation.

"You don't," he said, passing the cigarette to her. He did a good job of pretending to be calm, a trick she'd mastered long ago.

"What?" she said, not raising the cigarette to her lips.

"Joyce, this isn't something you have to deal with," Jim elaborated. "I won't ask you to-"

"Like *hell*," Joyce said, glaring at him. As smart as he was, Jim Hopper could be an idiot sometimes. "Jane needs help, and you're telling me I should stay here and do nothing?"

Jim sighed, rubbed a hand over his jaw. "That's not what I meant."

"Remember what happened last time you went off on your own?" she asked, well aware that her voice was rising, her heart racing, but she was too angered by his suggestion to care.

Did he really think she would be okay with him doing this alone? That she would simply step back and let him do this, when the last time he'd shouldered a self-imposed burden of investigation it had nearly gotten him *killed*? Did he really think she'd be able to live with herself if this time, she was too late?

He was quiet, and for a few moments the only sound was the sharp rustling of fall leaves as they blew across her driveway.

"Joyce," he said simply, the look in his eyes shifting from consideration to something softer, almost tender. It wasn't the first time she'd seen it, this particular gaze, and something in it made her heart beat faster, made her throat burn and her lungs shrink. They were spinning in circles around *something*, she knew; something unspoken and bellowed in the way they looked at each other,

something borne of shared cigarettes and years of memories spanning from their high school years to navigating the Upside Down together.

But they never had time to figure it out before the next crisis erupted. Maybe they never would.

“We’re never going to have normal lives, Hop,” she said, her voice flat as the image of Bob Newby’s round face and sparkling green gaze flashed in her mind’s eye. “Nothing’s going to go back to the way it was.”

He seemed to recognize his statement from her lips, blinking a few times under the sheriff’s hat he wore even when he was off-duty. Masked in her words lay a declaration: *you don’t have to protect me from whatever this is. You can’t protect me from it.*

So when he pulled into her driveway after work the next day, she got in his truck without a second thought. He’d helped her save her kid – now it was her turn to help him save his.

And that was how Joyce Byers ended up on Murray Bauman’s doorstep, shivering slightly in the cold, serving as the buffer between two clashing egos.

Jim muttered something she couldn’t understand, words falling out of his mouth in a knotted, aggressively flat mess. Apparently, Bauman couldn’t make any more sense of it than she could.

“You’re going to have to speak up,” he said, still smirking.

“We need your help,” Joyce stepped in from her place by Jim’s side. “We need answers about Hawkins Lab.”

Bauman nodded. “Come in.”

Murray Bauman’s apartment was a mess.

Joyce knew her own housekeeping abilities left a bit to be desired – her shifts at Melvald’s gave her only limited time for upkeep, and as a result the vast majority of her days off were spent scrubbing floors and attempting to expunge a layer of dust that never seemed to

evacuate the flat surfaces in her home. Nonetheless, when she looked at the journalist's place, she felt a little better. At least she made an effort.

Bauman seated them on a golden-orange couch peppered with stains in an assortment of tans and greens, sandwiched between piles of books and dusty manuscripts. He plunked down opposite them in a green chair, folding his hands in his lap.

"So, you need information about the lab," Bauman said. "Why?"

"You don't need to know," Jim said.

"Probably not," Bauman admitted. "But I *want* to know."

"We all want things," Jim muttered. "This isn't going to be your next story, Murray."

Bauman laughed. "Do you think I'm stupid enough to do that? Whatever this is, it would open the curtain too far."

Joyce frowned. "The curtain?"

"The realm of general believability the public absorbs," Bauman elaborated. "There's a *reason* Barbara Holland died from a chemical spill. There's a *reason* Bob Newby was mauled by a bear. 'They were eaten by inter-dimensional monsters' sounds too far-fetched. It pulls back the curtain too far, so to speak."

Joyce flinched, throat closing, and she buried her hands beneath her thighs to keep them from shaking. Though Bob's funeral had been almost a year ago, she remembered the stale scent of flowers as clearly as though she'd just sat down in the church, cold sunlight filtering in through stained glass windows that cast blood-red shadows on the floor. *You got him involved*, her brain had yelled at her, and she couldn't hear the pastor's words over its shrieking. *You caused this. If not for you, he'd still be alive.*

She'd made peace with it now, accepted the pain as part of herself. But much as Jim had told her that night at the Snow Ball, it didn't go away – it just got easier. And remembering, like she was being forced to do now...well, that still felt like tearing her heart from her chest,

like squeezing her lungs in a vice.

Jim caught her gaze and she felt her heartbeat slow, his presence returning her to the moment. She took a quiet, deep breath, banishing her insecurities and doubts. The past was the past. They were here to fight for Jane's future.

Bauman, oblivious to her struggle and Jim's understanding, stopped for a second to look from her to Jim and back to her again. "I already know whatever would bring you two to my door isn't just pulling back the curtain – it's setting it on *fire*."

"Yeah, all right," Jim said, sounding exasperated. "We need to know more about the tests the lab did. How many kids they experimented on."

"Can you help us?" Joyce asked, her patience beginning to wear thin. If this was a dead end, she and Jim needed to know sooner rather than later.

"Lucky for you, I can," Bauman said, and Joyce let out a sigh of relief: she glanced at Jim, watched as he ran a hand over his face and his shoulders, once tense, slumped.

"But—" Bauman added, and just like that, Joyce felt her stomach drop.

"But *what*?" Jim asked, sounding as though it was taking every ounce of his restraint not to reach across the chipped coffee table and punch Murray Bauman in the face.

"I haven't touched the files in...oh, probably six months or so," Bauman said. "Rest assured, I have what you're looking for. But you're going to have to go information-diving, so to speak. Paddling through some papers. A file-folder scavenger hunt."

Jim looked over at her, and she knew they were thinking the same thing: *the kids*. She'd told Jonathan she'd be coming home later tonight, and undoubtedly, he'd told Jane the same. If the state of Bauman's apartment reflected the condition of the Hawkins Lab files, they could be here until the end of the year. But they needed the

information, and they needed it badly, and dammit, even if she found herself knee-deep in old cigarette butts and tinfoil hats she was going to get it.

Jim didn't have to say anything for her to know what he was thinking: someone needed to watch over Jane tonight, to make sure she was okay, to comfort her if she had another of her visions. And with both of them here, the ideal candidates for the position had both vacated Hawkins.

"I need to make a phone call," Joyce said. "Is there a pay phone outside, or—"

Bauman smiled, aimed a wink in her direction. "For you? One call is free."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jim's jaw clench.

Bauman led her through a maze of old storage boxes into a room that barely passed for a kitchen, pots and pans collecting on a scratched plastic countertop, dirty dishes congregating inside and atop a tarnished silver sink. They arrived at a phone attached to the wall – not unlike the one she used to have – and he placed his hand over it before she could pick it up.

"*One* call," he said. "Short. They're probably trying to track my location, the bastards."

Joyce frowned, wondering what "bastards" would be tracking Murray Bauman, conspiracy theorist. But given her life, the various outlandish circumstances she'd lived through, she decided it was best to give him the benefit of the doubt. To anyone who wasn't privy to her experiences, she would sound crazy: perhaps the same went for him.

She nodded in understanding, and Bauman released his grip on the phone.

"Go forth and communicate with the world," he said with a sweeping gesture, beckoning her toward the receiver before stumbling off

toward the rest of the apartment, where he had been working on pulling relevant files from a room overflowing with cabinets and loose papers. Joyce tried not to let the sight of it discourage her: clearly, he remembered having the information they were looking for. Now, it was just a matter of locating it. And she and Hop could do it. They *would* do it. But first, they had to take care of the kids.

She dialed her house's phone number, silently praying Jonathan hadn't gone to Nancy's for the evening. Now more than ever, it was of paramount importance that he answered the phone.

One ring.

She swallowed hard, drumming her fingers against off-white plastic. *Please, Jonathan. Please.*

Two rings.

Jonathan, if you're there, I need you to pick up. Please pick up.

Three rings.

"Hello?"

"Jonathan," Joyce breathed into the receiver, well aware of how frantic she sounded. *Thank God.* "Honey, it's mom. Hopper and I have had a change of plans."

Quiet, for a few moments, as her son processed this information. Then,

"Mom, are you okay? Did you find Murray Bauman?"

"Yes," Joyce said, twisting the phone's cord around her forefinger, untwisting it, twisting it again. "We're fine. And he can help, but we have to look for the file. We probably won't be able to make it back to Hawkins tonight, so Hopper was hoping you could check on Jane."

"She's already here. They're all playing games," Jonathan said. "Should I tell her she can stay tonight?"

"Yes!" Joyce exclaimed, relieved to have finally gotten one piece of

good news, seemingly without a catch. “That would be perfect. Thank you so much.”

She battled the urge to ask him to put Will on the phone, just so she could hear his voice – so she could indulge the voices in the back of her head that suggested all manners of dark possibilities, of fears she knew would never come to fruition. *He’s fine*, she reassured herself. *Jonathan would tell you if something was wrong.*

Joyce noticed Jim lingering on the outskirts of the kitchen, holding a manila folder in his left hand and flipping through it with his right. He’d taken off his hat and his coat, seemingly accepting that they’d remain here for a considerable amount of time, and she realized she should probably do the same: it looked to be a very long night.

He wasn’t eavesdropping, but she could tell he was on edge just as much as she was. A dull ache throbbed in her chest, one she knew mirrored his own pain: they never wanted to part from the kids, but especially under circumstances like these.

“Honey, can you put Jane on?” she asked. “Hop wants to talk to her.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jonathan said. “I’ll go get her. Just a minute.”

“I love y-“ Joyce blurted, but she was too late – Jonathan had already set the receiver down. She sighed – the kids knew she loved them. But it was instinct to tell them at every moment, at the end of every conversation. If last year had taught her nothing else, it was that there was no way to know which exchange of words could be their last.

“Hop?” Joyce said, accepting that her son had abandoned her. She pointed to the phone. “Jane.”

At that, Jim’s head snapped up from the folder. He made his way through the kitchen, navigating around piles of dirty dishes and various expired foods halfway through the decaying process, setting the file down on the counter. It took him less than a minute to reach her, and she sensed gratitude in his gaze.

It took a little longer for Jonathan to pry Jane away from the kids’

game, but eventually the sound of her voice crackled over Bauman's phone.

"Dad?" Jane said, and Joyce handed the device to Jim.

"Hey, kid," Jim said, his tone changing, softening in the way it always did when he talked to her. "I don't think I'm going to make it home tonight."

Quiet, as Jane spoke. Joyce picked up the file and wandered away, wanting to give him some privacy. Unfortunately his voice carried, and the quiet background music Bauman had put on his record player did little to mask the conversation.

"No, you're staying with Jonathan and Will," she heard him say.

Quiet again. When Jim spoke next, she heard a tiny tremor in his voice.

"I know. I know," he said. "We're getting closer to figuring it out. Joyce and I are getting answers. I promise."

Joyce knew the significance of those words: *a promise is something you never, ever break*. Feeling a lump forming in her throat, she swallowed hard and looked away.

Jim spoke softly – she could barely hear him now, and was only able to make out the last four words of his sentence.

"I love you, kid."

And a few seconds and a soft *click* later, he hung up.

He lingered by the phone a few moments longer, his hand on the receiver, and the only word her exhaustion addled brain provided her for a descriptor was *lost*. Jim Hopper, Hawkins chief of police, looked hopelessly lost in a maze of emotions and missing children and stacks of papers they had only one night to sort through. He was lost in a labyrinth of his past, of the worst memories of his life, flashbacks he feared re-living in the future, all pressing down on him as he stood with his fingers curled around the phone.

Joyce couldn't help it – she couldn't stand seeing him like this, the man who saved her, saved her family, saved their town. She walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder, hoping the gesture would offer him at least a small measure of comfort. It was almost muscle memory, the pit in her stomach, even though none of her kids were directly involved this time. The dread, the torment, the agony... it lurked in the darkest corners of her head along with her guilt, twins that never really stopped haunting her.

At her touch, Jim turned around. He looked down at her with red-rimmed blue eyes, and she wondered if he was close to crying. Just the thought was enough to bring that pesky lump in her throat back, and only the knowledge that her comfort would be of little help if *she* was crying forced it to flatten.

“Hop,” she said, sliding her hand down to his forearm. It was hard not to marvel a little at their circumstances, how everything and nothing had changed, how now, a year later, they could find themselves standing together against a foe larger than themselves yet again.

She didn't want to tell him it was going to be okay, because that would be making a promise she couldn't keep. She didn't want tell him not to blame himself, because she knew her words wouldn't stop him from doing just that. She didn't want to tell him he wouldn't lose Jane, because as much as it broke her heart, all she could promise him was that she would do everything in her power to keep it from happening.

So instead she simply stood in Murray Bauman's dimly-lit kitchen with her hands on his shoulders, and reached up to wipe away the single tear that traced down his cheek before it wove its way through his beard.

“Joyce,” he murmured, leaning into the warmth of her touch, and though she'd said only a single syllable it had been enough for him to understand.

Joyce's eyes were slipping shut, her fingers shaking as she methodically combed through another of Bauman's files and, finding

nothing relevant to their cause, deposited it with a *thunk* on the ground. Jim, beside her, seemed to be having similar luck: they'd each sifted through at least twenty hefty folders filled with outlines, grainy photos, data sheets and newspaper clippings, but they didn't pertain to Martin Brenner or the Department of Energy's experiments.

Bauman had taken it upon himself to help, though he was going slower than she and Jim, apparently losing himself in cases past as he sipped watered-down vodka from a plastic cup. Every so often she caught him staring at them from his chair, catching Joyce's eye and giving her a smirk. She was too tired to interpret the expression and just looked away, hoping against all hope that this was the folder in which she'd find information about the experiments.

And at one-fifteen in the morning, at last, success.

"Hop!" she exclaimed, reaching over and squeezing his shoulder. "I found it!"

He jumped, and she dimly realized he must have fallen into the same stupor that once claimed her.

"What?"

"The experiments! The kids," she said, thumbing quickly through the pages as Jim moved closer. They were littered with photographs of children against a white background, each listing a number and a name. 001. 002. 003. 004. 005. 006. 007. 008. 009. 010.

Jane was right – there were others like her, others whom Brenner – who it appeared had been 001 – could be using to find her, to bring her back to the Department of Energy. Her visions weren't just dreams; or at least, it seemed they were at least foundationally based in reality.

011.

Jane Ives.

She heard Jim's breath catch at Jane's page, and she paused for a moment, allowing him to take in some of the information.

Mother: Terry Ives.

Father: Martin Brenner.

Status: Active.

Abilities: Telekinesis.

So engrossed were they in their discovery, neither of them noticed Bauman leave the room: they only noticed him re-emerge with a pair of drinks in his hand, practically shoving the glasses in their faces as they were forced to redirect their attention.

“Well done, team,” he said, offering them a crooked grin. “Time to celebrate.”

Joyce slammed the file closed, terrified the drinks could spill and render the information useless.

“We can’t,” she said, trying to sound apologetic, likely sounding nothing more than utterly exhausted. “We...”

“There’s still a hell of a lot missing,” Jim said, though Joyce could tell from the lilt at the end of his sentence that he was relieved. At last, they’d found something they could use. “We’re not celebrating yet.”

Bauman rolled his eyes, retreating to his chair and placing the glasses on the coffee table.

“Have you two ever thought about celebrating making progress? Celebrating being alive, after everything you’ve been through? Hell, celebrating having *each other*?”

Having each other?

A long silence was born from Bauman’s final question, filled only by the clinking of ice cubes in Bauman’s glass and the white noise of the record player. Joyce felt a blush creeping over her cheeks and looked down at the file, pretending to busy herself by aligning the edges of the papers. Jim stiffened next to her, his back ramrod-straight.

Neither of them wanted to speak first.

Thankfully, Bauman relieved them of the burden. He snorted, drawing both of their attention back to him as the derisive sound morphed into a giggle, which matured into a full laugh.

“Jesus,” he said, gripping his sides. “Don’t tell me...don’t tell me you’re as bad as the kids.”

“What?” Joyce stammered.

As bad as the kids? She knew Jonathan and Nancy had gone to visit him a year ago, but she hadn’t exactly immersed herself in the details of their relationship – at the time, she’d been a little too busy trying to push an inter-dimensional monster out of her youngest son. As long as Jonathan was happy, she was happy.

“We’re not –“ Jim said, stumbling over his words and pulling her back to reality. “Joyce and I aren’t-“

He looked at her, pleading, and she imagined his expression was mirrored in her own.

“We’re friends,” Joyce finished, cheeks aflame.

It wasn’t a lie, she thought. He came over to help her re-organize her house after everything with Will ended, he talked to her on the phone when she woke up from her myriad of nightmares, he visited her at work and brought Jane over for game nights at the Byers house. He helped her clean up after dinners with the kids and shared smokes with her on her front porch, asked her if she was all right, asked her if the boys were okay.

He told her, time and time again, that if she needed anything she could call him. He wrapped his strong arms around her when it was too much, when she couldn’t keep the shadows of her grief and guilt at bay, told her over and over again that it wasn’t her fault. Her skin tingled as she remembered the warm pressure of his lips in her hair, the night at the Snow Ball and a few nights since, when she needed him most. When he was the only one that could help her fight the demons that she couldn’t let her kids see, the ones she could only let

out around him, because she knew the sight of them wouldn't send him running. Because he had his demons, too.

They were friends. Weren't they?

"You have to be shitting me," Bauman said, taking a sip from his glass and setting it on the table. "That, Joyce Byers, is the second-biggest lie I've been told under this room."

"She's not lying," Jim growled. "Save your conspiracy theories for the aliens, Murray."

"Humor me," Bauman said, still smirking, looking from her to Jim and back at her again. "I think I have this all figured out. Not that you'll tell me if I'm right, but I'll be able to tell."

He stopped for a moment, smirk morphing into a full grin.

"I always can."

Joyce's heart felt as though it were about to crawl out of her throat and run for the door, which was exactly what she felt like doing. But Jim wasn't moving – he was probably in some kind of shock – and her own legs wouldn't respond to her requests to move. So, for the time being, she was stuck hearing Murray Bauman's theories on her relationship with Jim Hopper.

"You," he said, aiming all of his attention on Jim. "Fell hard in high school, right? She wasn't your first love, but oh, she was your *deepest*. The girl that made you realize how much you could care about someone – how home could be a person, not a place, all that flowery romantic shit. Too bad she grew out of feeling that way about you."

She grew out of feeling that way about you. Certainly he didn't mean... she and Jim had dated in high school, and yes, he had cared about her. And though they had had a physical relationship, they'd never said those three words – those words that were too big for two seventeen-year-olds who hadn't yet figured themselves out, much less the meaning of that four-letter behemoth.

Yes, some of the happiest memories of her youth were tied to him – smoking under the stairs, running away from Mr. Cooper, laughing

with her hand in his, kissing him in the back of his car until her lungs burned and the rest of the world melted away.

“But you told yourself it didn’t matter in the end,” Bauman continued. “You went off to the war, then to the big city, then to someone else’s arms, and she faded. But she was always there, in the back of your mind, a question you couldn’t answer. And when the unspeakable happened and things fell apart, you were drawn back to Hawkins, back to that high school sweetheart you never fully fell out of love with. Call it coincidence, if that helps you sleep at night. But I know there are no coincidences, and at this point you should, too, Jim. I’d call it...”

He paused for dramatic effect, his brown eyes sparkling.

“Destiny.”

Joyce couldn’t look at him. She couldn’t look at either of them.

Could it be true? Could any of it be true? God, Jim had slept around with just about every woman in Hawkins *but* her, back when he was still drinking and self-medicating and doing everything to avoid thinking about anything. That didn’t sound like a formula for harboring secret feelings for someone, did it? Up until Will was taken, he hadn’t so much as paid her the time of day except for when Lonnie’s outbursts made his presence necessary, in a professional light.

“You, Joyce Byers, are harder to read,” Bauman said, and she forced herself to look at him. “But I think I can translate you.”

She took a deep breath, trying to prepare herself for whatever the hell came out of Murray Bauman’s mouth. *We found the file*, she reminded herself, trying to regulate her breathing. *That’s the important thing. None of this...none of it matters. None of it is true.*

“He was your first real love, and that was terrifying,” Bauman said. “That feeling of needing someone, of part of your heart depending on them to keep beating...it hurt, didn’t it? You panicked. So you told yourself he didn’t need you, and you found someone you could survive without. Someone named...”

He snapped his fingers a few times, pinching his lips together in a firm, white line.

“Lonnie,” Jim offered, and Joyce’s jaw dropped.

Was he going along with this? Did he believe any of this was real? That this conspiracy theorist’s ramblings had any merit? She stiffened, sitting up straight, staring Murray Bauman in the eye. The surest way to disprove him would be to act like none of this affected her, and for her own sake, she needed to be unaffected.

“Lonnie,” Bauman purred. “And things were okay with Lonnie, until they weren’t okay anymore, until they were *bad*. And sometimes you wondered what life would have been like if you hadn’t extinguished that old high school flame. But then again, though he was the first time you played that game, he wouldn’t be your last. You weren’t exactly keen to let Bob Newby into your life, God rest his soul. We liked Bob, didn’t we?”

He looked at Joyce, as if expecting her to answer, but her lips were sealed shut. Her pulse was a roaring waterfall, drowning out the rest of the world, her breathing a hurricane that threatened to rip her chest apart.

We liked Bob, didn’t we?

She did.

She did like Bob.

Bob was dead and it was her fault.

Bob was dead and it was her *fault*.

Bob was dead and it was her fault and she felt that familiar hole opening up inside her, swallowing her again. And she was back in the lab, hearing his screams, tears streaming down her face as Jim wrapped an arm around her and pulled her, kicking and screaming, out the door and into a safety she didn’t deserve because Bob was dead and it was her fault for bringing him into this and letting him interpret the map so she could save...

So she could save...

Jim.

"We sure did," Bauman continued, raising an eyebrow. "Bob was safe, comfortable, easy. Oh, we *liked* Bob. We didn't quite *love* Bob."

"That's enough!" someone yelled, and startled, Joyce remembered Jim was sitting next to her.

She felt a hand on her trembling shoulder, turned her head toward the source of the warmth as her lungs burned and the world blurred around her. *Jim.*

"Joyce," he said, his voice soft. "I need you to relax, okay? I need you to slow down your breathing. Take deep breaths in, and out. In, and out."

In, and out.

She got some air halfway down her throat, tried harder, and it reached her lungs.

In, and out.

A little more this time, and the world started coming back into focus.

In, and out.

Jim, sitting beside her, staring at her intently, guiding her back from the gates of a flashback-themed panic attack.

The shaking stopped.

"Are you okay?" he asked, the entire world narrowing down to this couch, to his hand on her shoulder and his blue eyes searching for truth in hers.

All she could do was nod, though the gesture was a lie.

"Shut your goddamn mouth, Murray," Jim snarled.

Bauman's grin was the widest she had seen it, yellow teeth twinkling

as he downed the last of his drink.

“That, right there,” he said, “did nothing to disprove my theory.”